open wide our hearts
the enduring call to love *a pastoral letter against racism*

High School Activity: Dehumanization in Nazi Germany

Grade: High School—Course 2 (CCC 1700-1709, 2196), Course 3 (CCC 1823), Course 4 (CCC 760, 781-782, 791, 2208, 2212), Course 5 (CCC 1396-1398), Course 6 (CCC 1700, 1956-1960, 2196, 2234-2243, 2258-2262, 2475-2487), Option B, Option C (CCC 842, 1877-1948, 1928-1942, 2196-2257), or Option E.

Doctrinal Elements:

- The unity of the human race (CCC 760);
- Love of God and love of neighbor (cf. Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, Mark 12:29-31) (CCC 1396-1398, 2196);
- Human dignity and moral code revealed by God as universal, meant for everyone (CCC 1700);
- The sacredness of all human life (CCC 1877-1948, 2196-2257);
- The natural moral law as the basis for human rights and duties (CCC 1956-1960);
- The Fifth Commandment (CCC 2258-2269, 2288-2298, 2302-2330).

"For a nation to be just, it must be a society that recognizes and respects the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. These rights precede any society because they flow from the dignity granted to each person as created by God."
– *U.S. bishops,* Open Wide Our Hearts

Objectives

Students should be able to:

1. Explain what occurred during the Holocaust during Nazi Germany.
2. Understand why and how we are called to live in peace with those of other religions and ethnic backgrounds.
3. Understand anti-Semitism and why the Catholic Church stands against it.

Quotes from *Open Wide our Hearts*

- "Racism occurs because a person ignores the fundamental truth that, because all humans share a common origin, they are all brothers and sisters, all equally made in the image of God."

- "To overcome discrimination, a community must interiorize the values that inspire just laws and live out, in day-to-day life, the conviction of the equal dignity of all.' Therefore, we affirm that participating in or fostering organizations that are built on racist ideology (for instance neo-Nazi movements and the Ku Klux Klan) is also sinful – they corrupt individuals and corrode communities. None of these organizations have a place in a just society."

- "As Christians, we are called to listen and know the stories of our brothers and sisters. We must create opportunities to hear, with open hearts, the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters, if we are to be moved with empathy to promote justice. Many groups, such as the Irish, Italians, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Poles, Jews, Chinese, and Japanese, can attest to having been the target of racial and ethnic prejudice in this country. It is also true that many groups are still experiencing prejudice, including rising anti-Semitism, the discrimination many Hispanics face today, and anti-Muslim sentiment."

Background for the Educator:

- Before beginning this activity, ensure that you are thoroughly aware of what took place during the Holocaust. There is ample information – both introductory and more in-depth—available from the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum here.

- Human rights are connected to the virtues; protecting the human rights of others is a way of loving our neighbor in response to what Jesus calls the greatest commandments—to love God and neighbor—(see Mark 12:28) and what has come to be known as the "Golden Rule," by which Jesus expects us to "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:31).

- Human rights are universal. They include the rights to life, basic physical needs such as food, water, and shelter, freedom from violence, the practice of religion without interference, and protection against unjust discrimination: "The equality of men rests essentially on their dignity as persons and the rights that flow from it: 'Every form of social or cultural discrimination in fundamental personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, color, social conditions, language, or religion must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design'" (CCC 1935, quoting paragraph 2 of the Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes.*)

- Have the students read the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate: On the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* prior to beginning this lesson. The document, while rather short, will provide you with an overview of how the Catholic Church has formalized its opposition to anti-Semitism over the last few decades.

Additional Resources for the Educator

- *We Remember: A Reflection on the Shoah*
- *Catholic Teaching on the Shoah: Implementing the Holy See's We Remember*
- *Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love.* A Pastoral Letter Against Racism

Instructions for the Lesson

- Ask the students to read together Mark 12:28-31.
    - What did you notice about this reading?
    - Does it have real world applications today? Why or why not?

Have students read the below description. If in a classroom setting, you may assign this for homework the day before.

> ***Background on the Holocaust during World War II***
> *The Holocaust—or "Shoah"—was the organized, systematic, government-backed annihilation of approximately six million Jewish men, women, and children at the hands of the Nazi regime that ruled Germany between 1933 and 1945. The Nazis used propaganda to spread a message that the German people were racially superior and that the Jews were inferior. In addition to the Jews, the Nazis also targeted the Roma people and certain marginalized groups, such as those with physical or intellectual disabilities.*
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> *In 1933, there were over nine million Jews living in the countries that Nazi Germany would soon occupy. It is important to note that many Germans and those of other nationalities from around the world did not initially understand the full scope of what Adolf Hitler, the leader of Nazi Germany, was planning. Little by little, over the mid-1930s and into the late 1930s, laws were introduced that systematically disenfranchised Jews within Germany society under the Nazis. The Jews were falsely portrayed as the cause of woes in German society, and propaganda was spread effectively criminalizing their presence and influence in society. They were regarded more and more as sub-human, until Hitler secretly initiated his "Final Solution" to exterminate Jews across the European continent. The Nazis initially estimated that the "Final Solution" would kill 11 million people.*
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> *Concentration camps and extermination camps were set up and operated through Western and Eastern Europe. Millions of Jews and others considered undesirable were forcefully deported to these camps, primarily between 1941 and 1944. Both inside and outside of Germany many were either entirely unaware of what was happening, or in denial that millions of people who had disappeared were being wiped out of society.*
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> *On May 7, 1945, the Nazi German armed forces surrendered to the allied nations led by the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States. Although the Holocaust was over,*

many survivors were displaced, often with no surviving family members or livelihood. Europe now faced a large humanitarian crisis. Many Jews fled to Israel, which was established as an independent and sovereign nation in 1948. The Holocaust was a lesson, for those willing to learn it, about the need to recognize others' human dignity, and to confront evil when it is in our midst.

Help students understand how the atrocities in Nazi Germany violated the principles of Catholic social teaching.

- Ask the students to gather in small groups and name violations of Catholic Social Teaching in 3 to 5 minutes.

- Discuss, in particular, violations of the life and dignity of the human person.

- Lead a discussion or ask students to discuss in small groups and present to the class:
    - What would cause someone to believe false rhetoric about a group of people? Why did so many people in Nazi Germany come to incorrectly believe that Jews did not have the same human rights or dignity as others in society?
    - Why is it important for Christians and those of other faiths to be aware of what occurred in the Holocaust, and to oppose anti-Semitism? What in our faith tradition tells us to oppose an ideology that alienates an entire group?
    - Why does the Gospel compel disciples of Jesus Christ to speak out when the dignity of others is not being recognized?
    - What groups of people are commonly dehumanized or belittled in public or private rhetoric today? How are you called to respond?
    - Sometimes we hold beliefs very different from other religions and groups of people. Can groups who are different from one another still live in peace? Do we need to sacrifice our own beliefs in order to love those who believe different things than we do? Why or why not?
    - What might the extreme example of Nazi Germany have to do with the way racism is experienced in the United States today?

Summary and Final Activity:

Ask the students to research the life of Saint Maximilian Kolbe, a Catholic priest who was martyred during the Holocaust.

- What features of his martyrdom at the hands of the Nazis make him such a courageous saint?
- What are some details about his life and ministries as a priest before his capture that indicated that he was living for the Lord?

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